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PREVENTING UNDERAGE DRINKING: TOWN HALL MEETINGS

Sharing the Experience

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
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Background Information

Alcohol is the most widely used substance of abuse among America's youth, according to a 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. A higher percentage of young people, ages 12 to 20, use alcohol (29 percent) than use tobacco (24 percent) or illicit drugs (14 percent), making underage drinking a leading public health problem in the United States. For teens, any use of alcohol—not just binge drinking or drinking and driving—involves risk. Alcohol use can affect the developing adolescent brain. Further, alcohol use among youth is strongly correlated with violence, risky sexual behavior, poor academic performance, alcohol-related driving incidents, and other harmful behaviors. Alcohol use among children and adolescents starts early and increases rapidly with age. Research has also found that adults who first used alcohol before age 15 are five times more likely to report dependence on or abuse of alcohol than adults who first used at age 21 or older.

As part of a national effort to prevent underage drinking and to help educate young people and caring adults about the risks associated with underage drinking, the Interagency Coordinating Committee for the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD) supported a series of town hall meetings that took place in communities across America on or around March 28, 2006, in conjunction with Alcohol Awareness Month.

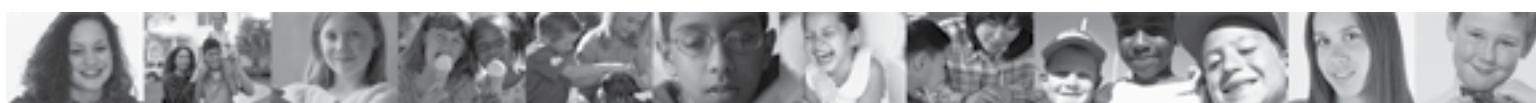
More than 1,200 Town Hall Meetings (THMs) were conducted around the Nation. Each THM strived to increase the understanding

and awareness of underage drinking and its consequences and to encourage individuals, families, and communities to address the problem. The THMs gave communities the opportunity to come together to learn more about the new research on underage drinking and its impact on both individuals and the community and to discuss and plan how their communities can best prevent underage alcohol use. These events provided opportunities to alert and empower the community as well as to generate interest from the media.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATING COMMITTEE ON THE PREVENTION OF UNDERAGE DRINKING (ICCPUD)

The Town Hall Meetings were spearheaded by the Federal Interagency Coordinating Committee (ICCPUD), which was established in 2004 by HHS to address the issue of underage drinking. ICCPUD includes:

- Administration for Children and Families
- Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Federal Trade Commission
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
- Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
- Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools
- Office of the Surgeon General
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Office of National Drug Control Policy





While the format and style of the THMs reflected that of the individual communities and their levels of readiness to address the issue, each THM adopted the same theme: “Start Talking Before They Start Drinking.”

Most communities brought together public officials, parents and youth, as well as community leaders and organizations from the fields of health, education, law enforcement, highway safety, and alcohol control to learn more about the science and consequences of underage drinking and to discuss how their communities could best prevent underage alcohol use by reducing demand, availability, and access. Some THMs educated the participants with facts, others formed task forces and coalitions, while still others expanded and enhanced their current efforts. Each THM also sought to offer parents and other concerned adults the knowledge and tools to connect with today’s youth about underage drinking.

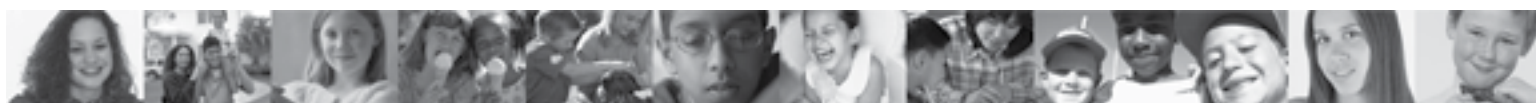
An opening video/DVD for Underage Drinking Prevention: Town Hall Meetings, along with a Town Hall Planning Guide, Facilitator’s Guide, and CD containing other relevant materials for local use and distribution was sent to all registered town hall sites. The Planning Guide included information such as:

- Getting Started
- Planning the Town Hall Meeting
- The Day of the Town Hall Meeting
- After the Town Hall Meeting
- Key Facts
- Sample Panelist Invitation Letter
- Sample Media Advisory

Communities were provided with current research and data regarding the risks of underage drinking. Information included:

- The dangers of underage drinking
- The impact of underage drinking on the community
- The importance of preventative steps for young children
- The value of parents discussing the issue with their children
- How preventing underage drinking can reduce its negative outcomes, such as injuries and death from alcohol-related crashes
- Other steps the community can take to reduce the demand for, the availability of, and access to alcohol by persons under the age of 21.

More than 1,200 community-based coalitions also received financial stipends to assist with the costs of the THMs.





State and Local Efforts

Over 1,200 THMs were conducted across the Nation, in all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and four territories. More meetings were actually held than received funding support from SAMHSA. Feedback was received from more than half of these sites. Many positive things were reported indicating appreciation of SAMHSA's guidance, evidence of community collaboration and support, the diversity of ideas shared by panelists, and opportunities to expand on current efforts.

Communities reiterated their appreciation for ICCPUD's support of the THMs, such as the meeting materials, and media tools. Many of the sites used the planning materials, the sample invitation letters, the fact sheets, the Ad Council PSAs, the videos and DVDs. Communities also worked with the schools, the local media, and other sources. For many, the SAMHSA stipend provided a way to begin the process for conducting local THMs to address a critical community issue.

The strength of the meetings was in the diversity of panelists, ideas, and participants. Some communities heard from individuals not always included in prevention efforts, such as emergency room doctors and nurses, insurance agents, paramedics, judges, and various local personalities. Youth were involved and included in all aspects of the meetings, presenting and

talking about the issue, and sharing their ideas to help begin to solve the problem. Meetings showed evidence of increased support and collaboration from major players in the communities, including law enforcement and the media.

Communities found the THMs to be opportunities to “connect the dots.”

Recommendations emerged to build on

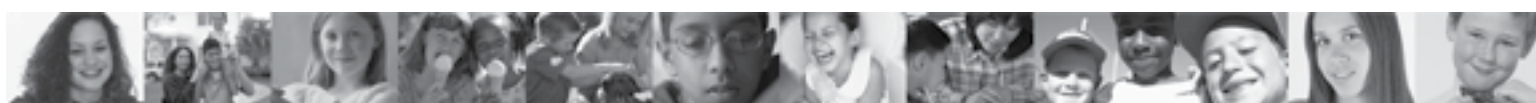
existing efforts and to better utilize CSAP's (Center for Substance Abuse Prevention) Strategic Prevention Framework as a guide for directing

community efforts. The meetings also provided a foundation from which to increase awareness of current research, as well as SAMHSA's National Outcomes Measures and evidence-based programs, resources, and strategies.

The presence of the media in support of the THMs was apparent. Prior to the events, the media in local communities assisted in promoting the THMs with PSAs. Frequently, press releases were positioned at the “front of the line” in a busy news environment. After the events, TV reports, newspaper articles, and related human interest stories appeared in almost every community where a THM took place. In many instances, the meetings were also taped and rebroadcast at later times and dates. In other areas, panel discussions were recorded on DVDs and videos and available for use by schools, organizations, and at future meetings.

The approach to underage drinking has to be multifaceted. It can't come from doctors and lawyers and the government or other entities. Everybody has to work together.

Richard Heyman, M.D., pediatrician and panel facilitator—Blue Ash, Ohio





“START TALKING BEFORE THEY START DRINKING” CAMPAIGN

A recently released series of television, print, radio, and Internet public service announcements, developed by the Ad Council, in collaboration with SAMHSA, were distributed to more than 28,000 media outlets and are now airing nationwide. The PSA messages target parents of children ages 11 to 15 with the “start talking before they start drinking” message.

In spite of unforeseen challenges and timing issues—i.e., tornadoes interrupted meetings held in Arkansas, Michigan, Tennessee, and Iowa; the “monsoon night” of the decade hit parts of California; Drug-Free Communities grant applications were due and spring break commitments lured young people and families away—communities turned the opportunities into successful and meaningful events.

Some of the highlights:

- One community site held “Community Conversations” to address underage drinking—one of the best aspects was the honesty of students who revealed the ingenious ways youth access alcohol. The timing of the meeting was intentional—just before spring break—because of the proximity to the Mexico border where teens cross to drink and where age restrictions are not as likely to be enforced.
- One grantee collaborated with the California Wellness Foundation, which funded a film on Alcopops, and featured youth as investigative reporters on this issue. Viewed at the THM, the film

demonstrated youth involvement in media advocacy to change policy impacting underage drinking. The message from this site was to put young people out front as messengers and to feature them as capable, concerned, and competent.

- Another site had been working with community partners over the past year on a social host ordinance to help discourage parents and other adults from allowing underage drinking in their homes. Following the THM, there was an editorial in the local newspaper supporting the ordinance with a \$1,000 stipend attached.
- In Montana, a site had been collaborating with a local TV station since last fall. The station funded the production of video clips, which portrayed students telling their stories. The film was used on May 4, 2006, at their THM.
- Prior to their THM, a group of 30 young people developed a service learning project investigating the serving of alcoholic beverages on the ferry, which is the main mode of transportation to the island where they live. Information gathered from the investigation was provided to attendees at the THM.
- A community in Wyoming is geographically diverse and spread out, so the April 2006 THM utilized a “call-in” format which was broadcast on public television. As a result, the community passed a social host law and keg registration.





- A Florida site's panel discussion was filmed in their television studio, and a DVD is now available. They also have a link to Dish Network satellite TV. The program has been rebroadcast several times.
- The University of Georgia plans to change the school's conduct code to address underage and binge drinking based on comments provided at a Town Hall Meeting attended by University officials and students.





Next Steps for Communities

Communities enthusiastically reported to follow up the THMs with future activities and strategies. They plan to:

- Schedule followup meetings with interested community stakeholders
- Continue discussions at planned quarterly meetings
- Include time for next steps at followup meetings
- Develop next steps based on feedback submitted at the THMs
- Hold future THMs at alternate locations, along with expansion to other related topics
- Establish THMs as annual events.
- Hold THMs in conjunction with community awards, providing communities with at least 6 months notice and increased opportunities for advertising the events
- Conduct more Teach-Ins

Some communities are using the THMs to establish and/or expand already existing prevention efforts. For example, they are:

- Forming coalitions to continue efforts to prevent underage drinking
- Increasing membership of current coalitions
- Revitalizing neighborhood parent patrols
- Forming community youth teams
- Increasing the involvement of underage drug task forces

Other communities intend to follow up the THMs by:

- Developing e-mail listservs, which will also be used as invitation lists for future events
- Contacting parents who submitted questions for the panel
- Sending out thank you letters to all attendees, along with fact sheets and other local information

Based on the needs of the individual communities, THM planners are also using the suggestions, recommendations, and feedback of attendees to reinforce the need for increased prevention efforts. More examples include:

- Developing and conducting community needs assessments
- Using the gathered information as “ammunition” to pass related local ordinances that help prevent underage drinking
- Developing age-appropriate information

Communities appear energized to take the necessary steps to prevent and reduce underage drinking. Armed with local facts and information, as well as available research and resources, numerous followup efforts are planned around the themes that emerged at the local meetings. As noted in their feedback, communities and schools plan to continue to educate parents, youth, and other adults about the serious effects of alcohol, including: the legal consequences of underage drinking, the social perceptions and misperceptions of





youth and alcohol abuse, and the need for more involvement of parents and other responsible adults. Increased accountability is expected—from parents, law enforcement, the alcohol industry, and the community at large. And for now, those who participated have committed to move forward.





Collaborative Efforts

A wide variety of public and private entities contributed to the success of the Town Hall Meetings, including public health agencies, advocacy groups, and representatives of the alcoholic beverage industry. Several Federal activities supported by the ICCPUD agencies also helped to ensure the success of the meetings. These include: the Drug-Free Communities Support Program, Grants to Reduce Alcohol Abuse Program, Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program, Leadership to Keep Children

Alcohol Free,
Reach Out Now,
and SMASHED.

The Drug-Free Communities Support Program

is a collaborative initiative sponsored by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) in partnership with SAMHSA. The major goals of the initiative are to reduce substance abuse among youth and adults by addressing the risk and protective factors in a community, and to establish and strengthen collaboration among communities, agencies, and Federal, State, local, and tribal governments to support the efforts of community coalitions working to prevent and reduce substance abuse among youth.

Each of the Drug-Free Communities was asked to plan, conduct, and work with their local communities to conduct THMs and received

stipends to assist in the implementation of their events.

The Enforcing the Underage Drinking Laws Program (EUDL) is the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) central underage drinking prevention initiative. EUDL is a nation-wide State and community-based, multi-disciplinary effort that seeks to prevent access to and consumption of alcohol by minors, with a special emphasis on enforcement of underage drinking laws and implementation of best and most promising practice programming.

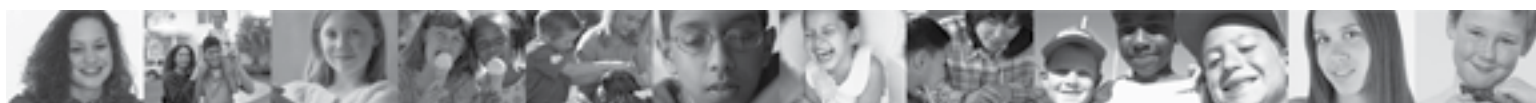
Of the 50 States and the District of Columbia where EUDL programs are implemented, 39 State and District

of Columbia EUDL Coordinators and/or their lead agencies either actively participated in or supported the underage drinking focused THMs. In addition, 22 of the 39 States' local EUDL grantees were involved in planning and/or participating in the THMs.

The Grants to Reduce Alcohol Abuse Program (GRAAP) is a 3-year initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools. GRAAP supports local school districts that develop and implement innovative prevention programs that include one or more proven strategies for reducing underage alcohol abuse as determined by Substance Abuse and

The fact that we have all of those laws on the books and we still have a serious problem with underage drinking tells me that what we really have is an attitude problem.

Representative Steve Kestell—University of Wisconsin-Sheboygan





Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Collaboratively, these grant recipients receive technical assistance from SAMHSA's five regional Centers for the Application of Technology (CAPT): Western CAPT, Central CAPT, Southwest CAPT, Southeast CAPT, and Northeast CAPT.

Of the 81 currently funded GRAAP sites, 52 either conducted or were part of a THM in their community. All of these sites utilized the strength and energy of their youth—in

the planning process, the implementation and conducting of the meetings, as well as the programs that took place.

The Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free is a unique coalition of Governors' spouses, Federal agencies, and public and private organizations to prevent the use of alcohol by children ages 9 to 15. The Leadership is supported by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Leadership's goal is to educate the American public about the dangers of early alcohol use and to mobilize action to prevent it.

" . . . [F]or all that's been done, there is still an elephant in the room with us tonight . . . It's time for all of us to talk about it. The elephant is the extended impact of early alcohol use—and that can be fatal to our children because the enormity of the problem is hidden. It is, in fact, a national and local public health crisis.

First Lady Mary Easley—Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Participating First Ladies and Governors gave THMs full support, as well as participation in the events and their involvement with the media.

Notes from *The Leadership Weekly Update*:

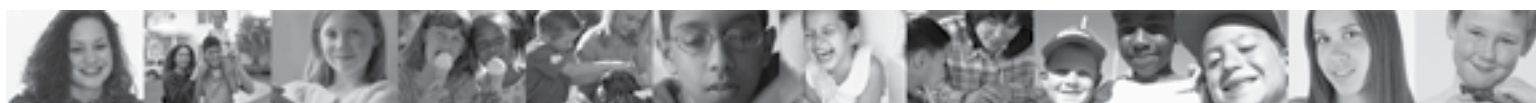
New Mexico's First Lady Barbara Richardson supported 34 local THMs in March and April. Her office and the Department of Health coordinated all the meetings. Mrs. Richardson also wrote an op-ed article in support of the THMs and the *Reach Out Now Teach-Ins*

that was sent to 20 newspapers statewide.

In Oregon, First Lady Mary Oberst announced that THMs were taking place in 46 communities during the months of April and May. In Portland, a THM was used to produce a TV special, "Underage Drinking: Oregon's Hidden Crisis" by Fox 12 and the Oregon Partnership.

In Wyoming, a THM was held on April 6th at the fairgrounds in Casper. Attendees were able to call in and talk with First Lady Nancy Freudenthal, who hosted the broadcast program from the Riverton studios of Wyoming Public Television.

In Hawaii, Lieutenant Governor James "Duke" Aiona combined Town Hall and Teach-In activities by inviting all Town Hall





participants to attend a “Training/Lessons Learned” meeting on April 13 to discuss and share information on the State’s THMs, as well as to discuss sustainability of the efforts.

Reach Out Now (RON) is a collaboration between SAMHSA, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Scholastic Inc. to provide school-based underage drinking prevention materials for use by fifth- and sixth-grade students, their families, and their teachers. For the fifth consecutive year, fifth- and sixth-grade classroom teachers throughout the nation received the two-part set of materials in time for Alcohol Awareness month in April.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) provided financial support for the ICCPUD National Underage Drinking Meeting at which the Town Hall Meetings were planned. Following the national meeting, NHTSA coordinated closely with the State Highway Safety Offices to encourage support for and involvement with the Town Hall Meetings in their States. Additionally, NHTSA provided copies of the educational package **SMASHED: Toxic Tales of Teens and Alcohol**, produced by HBO Family and distributed by RADD and NHTSA, to several States as requested by the local communities, with significant involvement in the Ohio statewide activities coordinated by RADD, NHTSA, the Ohio Highway Safety Office and the Ohio Governor’s Office and the Governor’s wife, Mrs. Taft, through The Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free. In all cases

where **SMASHED** was distributed, RADD and their public relations firm offered assistance in planning media support for the local community events.

REACH OUT NOW TEACH-INS

An event for students, led by community leaders, to reinforce the message of talking early and often with children before they begin illegal alcohol use.

In coordination with RON, Teach-Ins were held nationwide during the week of April 3–7 to reinforce the message to the Nation’s youth to reject alcohol. Teach-Ins are an opportunity for prominent national, youth, State, and local leaders, using a research-based curriculum and other helpful materials provided by SAMHSA, to teach students and the community about the dangers of underage alcohol use and encourage young people to make healthy decisions.

As a followup to the THMs, communities were encouraged to use these materials in their schools, as well as additional resources from ICCPUD agencies, to conduct Teach-Ins.





Conclusion

The THMs were an important first step in moving many communities to action. They began to discuss and look at ways of preventing and reducing underage drinking, an issue that impacts families, schools, and communities. For many, the meetings were also the first time key players came together to discuss a single issue. All levels of the community were involved—parents, youth, schools, law enforcement, mental health, government entities, and other organizations. Information, data, and research were provided to increase awareness of the issue. Open forums were facilitated to begin discussions of prevention and reduction strategies. Youth were included not only for their perspectives as part of the problem, but also as major players in the solution process. And community members pledged to work together on next steps. Available Federal and local resources were utilized, and community agencies and organizations joined together to contribute their strengths. As local communities united to acknowledge the problem and reality of underage drinking, there was an outpouring of support for continued efforts. The message was clear: We can impact the problem of underage drinking among our youth. We can help reduce the numbers of youth choosing to drink. We can make a difference—because hundreds of people in hundreds of communities across the Nation came together to “start talking before they start drinking.”





Acknowledgements

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